DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 083 496 CG 008 329

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TITLE Student Drug Use, Risk-Taking and Alienation.
PUB DATE May 73
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the American Psychiatric Association, 7-11 May 1973, Honolulu, Hawaii

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Alcoholism; Behavior Patterns; *College Students; *Drug Abuse; *Marihuana; Questionnaires; *Risk; Sedatives; Socially Deviant Behavior; *Student Alienation; Surveys

ABSTRACT

This study seeks: (1) to detect whether an increase in drug use occurred in the two years since a previous similar study; (2) to determine the kinds and levels of risk which the students associated with the nonprescription use of various drugs; and (3) to examine the extent to which the marihuana groups showed alienation. The study drew a proportionate random sample, stratified on the basis of sex class year, from the undergraduates in a southeastern coeducational university. The students received mailed questionnaires which examined the use of eight drugs. The results show that marijuana continuers, experimenters, and non-users differ significantly. More users report driving after drinking, using marihuana to overcome depression, and experiencing identity problems. Continuing marihuana users reported serious suicidal thoughts. The perception of fewer risks involved with marihuana use relates more directly to its use than do indicators of alienation. (Author/LAA)

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STUDENT DRUG USE, RISK-TAKING AND ALIENATION[1]

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Marijuana use among college students has increased to the extent that some investigators are suggesting that, in the statistical sense, non-use rather than use of the drug has become deviant collegiate behavior(1, 2, 3). In previous attempts to determine the motivation for taking marijuana and for the increasing popularity of this still illegal activity, we found significant differences in the kinds of mental states and experiences desired by marijuana users. In addition, we found that they expressed greater willingness to take the legal, social and psychological risks associated with marijuana use to achieve these desired effects(4, 5, 6). The question then arose as to whether this difference in risk-taking was due to a greater willingness to take risks on the part of the marijuana users or to a lesser subjective estimate of the risks involved.

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While risk-taking attitudes have been proposed as a basis for planning programs to control and predict drug abuse[7], alienation has been suggested as a more important predictor. Kenniston and Becker, e.g., have independently indicated that students who are alienated from or uncommitted to society and conventional norms are more likely candidates for marijuana and other drug experimentation[8, 9]. In addition, a significant association between subjective feelings of alienation and drug use among college seniors was found by Walters[1]. If drug users are alienated from society, perhaps they actually experience less risk in "dropping out"[8].

The purposes of this study, therefore, were threefold: (1) to detect whether an increase in drug use had indeed occurred in the two years since this college population had been previously studied, (2) to determine the kinds and levels of risks which the students perceived to be associated with the non-prescription use of various drugs and (3) to examine the extent to which the marijuana groups could be considered alienated.

SAMPLE AND METHOD

A proportionate random sample, stratified on the basis of sex and year in school, was drawn from the total enrollment of undergraduates in a large southeastern coeducational university during the Spring semester. The students were mailed questionnaires to be completed anonymously. Fifty of the mailed questionnaires were returned as undeliverable. If we consider all the others to have been received, then the response rate was 83%. The questionnaire covered the students' background, drug use, and perceptions of risks associated with various drugs. In addition, there were questions regarding possible indicators of alienation as well as Srole's Scale of Anomie [10]. Data were collected on 374 students and chi square analyses were used to compare the marijuana groups.

TABLE 1

UNDERGRADUATE MARIJUANA GROUPS BY SEX AND TOTAL SAMPLE

Marijuana Group	Men (N=257)	Women (N=117)	TOTAL (N=374)
Experimented	17%	9%	14%
Continued	38%	29%	35%
Never Used	45%	62%	51%

RESULTS

Marijuana Use:

The marijuana groups are shown in Table 1 by sex. Significantly more men than women undergraduates had either experimented with or continued to use marijuana ($p < .01$). There were no sex differences, however, in the age marijuana was first used. While more sophomores had used marijuana, the difference between classes was not statistically significant. Overall, 49% had had some experience with marijuana.

TABLE 2

USUAL AMOUNT OF MARIJUANA TAKEN ON AN OCCASION

BY FREQUENCY OF USE FOR CONTINUERS

	FREQUENCY OF MARIJUANA USE		
Usual Amount	Most days (N=24)	Weekly (N=52)	≤ Twice monthly (N=55)
≤ One	1	10	16
Two	3	18	24
Three	2	13	10
≥ Four	5	6	5
Unknown	13	5	0

Experimenters were those who reported having taken marijuana no more than twice in their lives. Thirteen students had used marijuana more often than that but were not now using it; these students were not considered experimenters, for the purposes of this study. Those who continued to use marijuana were grouped by frequency of use. Of the 131 continuers, 42% used it no more than twice monthly; 40% used it weekly; and 18% took marijuana most days or everyday. The usual amounts of marijuana taken on an occasion are shown in Table 2. Frequent marijuana users were likely to give responses such as: "lots", "all I have", or "depends on the quality, my desire, and environment", and these are listed in the table as unknown.

TABLE 3

CONTINUERS' REASONS FOR TAKING MARIJUANA

BY FREQUENCY OF USE

Reasons	Most days (N=24)	Once or twice weekly (N=52)	Less than twice monthly (N=55)	p
To relax, reduce tension	79%	38%	31%	.001
To enjoy sexual relations more	63%	31%	20%	.001
To feel closer to another person	46%	35%	16%	.02
To overcome depression	46%	29%	15%	.02
To be sociable	25%	40%	47%	ns

Experimenters indicated that they tried marijuana out of curiosity, to be sociable and to feel good. Most of the continuers used marijuana for greater sensory awareness, and exhilaration. Table 3 shows the reasons given by the continuers which distinguished between the frequency-of-use groups. Frequent marijuana users took it to relax, enjoy sex, feel closer to another person and overcome depression while other continuers took it to be sociable.

TABLE 4

OTHER DRUG USE BY MARIJUANA GROUPS

	MARIJUANA GROUP		
Drug	Continued (N=131)	Experimented (N=54)	Never Used (N=189)
Alcohol	100%	100%	86%
Hashish	85%	44%	--
Amphetamines	50%	20%	3%
L S D	28%	--	--
Sedatives	24%	13%	7%
Opium	14%	--	--
Cocaine	9%	--	--
Heroin	2%	--	--

Alcohol and Other Drug Use:

Other drugs used, even experimentally, are shown in Table 4 by marijuana group. Non-marijuana users had used only alcohol, amphetamines and sedatives while the marijuana users reported the use of a spectrum of drugs. The use of LSD, cocaine, opium and heroin was primarily experimental, i.e., used no more than twice in their lives. Seven students, however, had taken LSD about once a month. Marijuana users were also likely to be beer and wine drinkers and to drink often. In fact, of the 22 students who tried LSD or the hard drugs, 12 drank beer once a week or more.

TABLE 5

RISKS PERCEIVED WITH MARIJUANA BY UNDERGRADUATE USER GROUPS

	SOME RISKS WITH MARIJUANA			
Marijuana Group	Legal*	Emotional**	Physical**	Social**
Continued (N=131)	79%	24%	17%	15%
Experimented (N=52)	81%	43%	31%	40%
Never used (N=175)	92%	72%	65%	48%

*$p < .01$

**$p < .001$

Risks Perceived with Marijuana and Other Drugs:

The students indicated the extent of several types of risks they felt were involved in non-prescription use of different drugs. Two experimenters and 14 non-users, however, did not complete this section of their questionnaire. Table 5 shows the percentage of respondents who had perceived the various risks to be at least moderate for marijuana. The types of risks were defined as follows: legal risks in terms of arrest and punishment, emotional risk as a threat to mental stability, physical risk as detrimental to bodily health, and social risk as disapproval by friends.

The non-users among both men and women perceived significantly more risks in general than did either the experimenters or continuing users ($p < .02$). All groups considered the legal and emotional risks to be greater than the physical and social ones. That the risk of disapproval by friends was considered the least likely hazard is not surprising as 94% of the continuers, 72% of the experimenters and 48% of the non-users reported having close friends who used marijuana.

Women regardless of drug use, however, put significantly greater emphasis on the legal, physical and emotional risks than did the men ($p < .01$).

Almost all of the students, regardless of drug group, perceived heroin, opium and cocaine to involve substantial levels of legal, emotional, physical and social risks.

TABLE 6

PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF MALE STUDENTS

BY FREQUENCY OF MARIJUANA USE

WHO DROVE AFTER USING MARIJUANA OR ALCOHOL

	Frequency of Marijuana Use				
Drug	Most days (N=20)	Weekly (N=38)	Twice monthly (N=39)	Experimented (N=44)	Never Used (N=116)
Alcohol	95%	61%	82%	86%	64%
Marijuana	95%	50%	37%	11%	--
Drinking with marijuana	75%	37%	41%	14%	--

Driving and Drug Risks:

A behavioral aspect of risk taking, i.e., driving after using drugs, was examined in the men undergraduates. Many of the women indicated that they did not drive or did not have cars and therefore women were not included.

Seventy percent of the total sample of men admitted that they drove after drinking, 26% after using marijuana, 20% after alcohol and marijuana together and 5% after alcohol with amphetamines. Most of the students, however, reported that the drugs used had an adverse effect on their driving. Those who had used marijuana were also more likely to drive after drinking and after using any of the combination of drugs listed ($p < .01$). Table 6 shows the percentage of males who drove after using marijuana or alcohol. Those who took marijuana most days were more likely to combine drinking with driving.

TABLE 7

INDICATORS OF ALIENATION

	MARIJUANA GROUP			
Indicator	Continued (N=131)	Experimented (N=54)	Never used (N=189)	p
High Srole Anomie Score	17%	2%	13%	.05
Difficulty achieving identity	19%	6%	11%	.05
Difficulty in belonging	39%	17%	24%	.01
No present religion	27%	13%	7%	.001
Serious suicidal thoughts	14%	4%	7%	.05

Alienation:

Various indices of alienation were studied and are shown in Tab[illegible]. These included aspects of estrangement from self and society; religion was included as a possible source of values or norms. The percent of students having a high Srole Anomie Score were those who definitely agreed with at least 3 of the 5 items indicating social or interpersonal alienation. Using this criterion, experimenters were much less alienated than either continuers or non-users ($p < .05$); 17% of the continuers and 13% of the non-users compared with only 2% of the experimenters who definitely agreed with most of the Srole items indicating feelings of alienation. Experimenters were also less likely to report difficulty in achieving a sense of identity or independence. Very few of the students, regardless of drug group, reported having serious difficulties in general with their parents or having no friends in whom they could confide.

Serious Suicidal Thoughts Since Enrolling in College:

Both marijuana group and college class were significantly associated with having serious suicidal thoughts at least once since enrolling in college. While more women (13%) than men (7%) reported suicidal thoughts, the difference was not statistically significant. Significantly more sophomores (19%), however, than seniors (10%), juniors (9%) or freshmen (4%) reported serious suicidal thoughts since enrolling in college ($p < .05$).

More continuing marijuana users (14%) reported serious suicidal thoughts than did non-users (7%) or experimenters (4%). This difference was significant at the .05 level. Those who experimented with hard drugs had as high a report rate of suicidal thoughts as did the other marijuana continuers.

Alienation Indicators and Frequency of Marijuana Use:

Among the continuing users, the more frequent the marijuana use, the higher the Srole alienation score. Eleven percent of the infrequent users, 15% of the weekly users, and 33% of those who took marijuana most days had a high score ($p < .05$). Difficulty in achieving a sense of identity or independence was also reported by significantly more frequent users (38%) than weekly users (23%) or infrequent users (11%), $p < .05$. Those using marijuana most days were also more likely to agree that "nowadays a person has to live pretty much for today and let tomorrow take care of itself" ($p < .05$) and that "it's hardly fair to bring children into the world with the way things look for the future" ($p < .01$).

Permanent Changes in Personality of Continuers Due to Marijuana:

When asked if they could attribute any permanent changes in their personality to their experiences with marijuana, 43% of the continuers indicated there were none, 42% got more out of music, 28% got more out of life, 28% felt closer to friends and 26% were less hostile. The more frequently the students took marijuana the more likely they were to report changes in general and adverse changes in particular. Of the 24 who took marijuana most days, 7 reported a changed awareness of the passage of time, 5 less interest in school work, 4 apathy, 4 paranoia and 3 difficulty in communicating.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

The rate of marijuana use in this college population has increased since our earlier studies (4,6). The usual amount is still low but more students are continuing its use. Continuing marijuana use, however, does not appear to be accompanied to any great extent by a reduction in the consumption of alcohol.

No attempt was made to determine any general risk-taking propensity but rather whether the marijuana users actually perceived fewer risks associated with marijuana and this indeed seemed the case. The perception of greater legal, emotional, physical and social risks associated with marijuana use by the non-users in general and by the women in particular appears to deter experimentation. The primary risk seen by users was arrest and punishment, but this was not a sufficient deterrent perhaps because as Brill et al[11] found these students did not feel bound to obey laws they consider unreasonable. However, since marijuana users were more likely to drink and drive as well as use the other drugs and drive, they seem liable for additional risks. One is the actual driving situation; while laboratory studies of the effect of marijuana on driving are few and inconclusive, there are many documenting the detrimental effects of alcohol[12, 13]. The other risk is the increased possibility of detection because of the expanded law enforcement campaigns for highway safety. Indeed, Klein[14] reported that 53% of the chronic users in his study had been stopped by the police while under the influence of marijuana.

Because alienation is a complex concept involving many aspects, such as feelings of estrangement, lack of power and of values[15], it is difficult to assess its relationship to marijuana use in functioning college students. In Walter's study[1] the alienation found was primarily political. We found few significant associations between the possible indicators of alienation studied and marijuana use. Those found, such as having difficulty feeling a sense of belonging or difficulty achieving a sense of identity, might be considered part of the normal stage of development for adolescence rather than the result of a deep seated sense of estrangement from society. Frequency of marijuana use, however, is an important consideration.

Even though users reported that marijuana had enhanced their abilities to achieve feelings of identity and belonging, it is important to note the high percent of continuing marijuana users who reported serious suicidal thoughts. It is not known whether this is because the users' difficulties in achieving these feelings of identity and belonging continue to disturb them or whether it is due to a direct pharmacological effect of their drug use. While depressive feelings following chronic alcohol intoxication leading to suicidal attempts are recognized[16, 17], it is unknown whether such a depressive syndrome results from the chronic heavy use of marijuana. The fact that marijuana users take other drugs further complicates the situation. Other studies, however, [1, 6, 11] have also found emotional problems significantly associated with continued marijuana use.

It is of interest that on some indicators those who merely experimented with marijuana appeared less alienated than either continuing users or non-users. The experimenters may have used the drug as a means of self or other confrontation. They may have been willing to take the risks involved to achieve more meaningful experiences not otherwise readily available. As Brown[18] has said:

> ...risk taking is essential to human development and particularly to the process of individuation and identity in the adolescent... Without confrontation there is no relevant experience, no meaningful evaluation of self-competence, and ultimately no development of self nor of a sense of societal responsibility.

The problem remains as to how to achieve this condition of maturity in ways which are acceptable to both youth and society. The willingness to accept risks for worthy goals can be an asset, and a society which provides meaningful opportunities for personal growth can be enriched by it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to thank Dr. John Reed, Jr., his Sociology 85 class and Mrs. Mary Miller for their assistance with this study.

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